

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 293 060

CG 020 708

AUTHOR Rapaport, Ross J.
TITLE Team-Building to Reduce Residence Hall Staff Stress.
PUB DATE Feb 88
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *Dormitories; Higher Education; Intervention; Morale; *Resident Assistants; *Role Conflict; *Stress Management; *Stress Variables; Team Training; *Teamwork

ABSTRACT

Managing the multiple and often conflicting roles and responsibilities of the resident hall assistant (RA) often leads to stress. Team-building is one approach which may be used to reduce stress by increasing group cohesiveness and in turn social support among resident assistant staff members. Usually team-building involves a neutral party (consultant or counselor), a supervisor (residence hall director), and a work group (RA's). Residence hall staff team-building involves four steps. First, a neutral third party discusses the intervention with the supervisor. Second, the supervisor meets with the work group to determine members' feelings and desires regarding the team-building activity. Assuming the work group supports the intervention, the third step involves the third party meeting with each individual member of the work group and the leader. In the fourth step the third party may summarize and present the results of the interviews to the entire group during a team-building session which is held away from the work setting, or the work group may complete a structured exercise designed specifically to accomplish the predetermined goals of the team-building. Invariably work group members become more open in their communication with and supportive of one another as they learn they are not alone in their conflicts, concerns, stresses, and high points regarding their residence hall position. (ABL)

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TEAM-BUILDING TO REDUCE
RESIDENCE HALL STAFF STRESS

By

Ross J. Rapaport, Ph.D., NCC
Associate Professor, Counseling Center
Coordinator, Alcohol and Drug Abuse
Intervention and Prevention Program

Counseling Center
102 Foust Hall
Central Michigan University
Mt. Pleasant, Michigan 48859

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February, 1988

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INTRODUCTION

The student residence hall assistant's (RA) job consists of a variety of roles and responsibilities. In general, RAs provide counseling and programming to student residents, must attend to numerous administrative duties, are responsible for hall discipline and may occasionally function as the individual who is responsible for the entire residence hall (Greenwood & Lembcke, 1973).

The duties and responsibilities of an RA include developing general communication skills and a peer relationship with floor residents; providing residence hall programming, counseling and advisement; acting as a resource person; completing a variety of administrative duties; familiarizing himself or herself with safety issues as they relate to the hall; learning basic first aid skills; enforcing residence hall regulations; attending staff training; and maintaining open communication with the hall director and other RAs. In addition, RAs must attend to their own academic work and usually strive to maintain friendships with persons other than hall residents.

Often the multiple roles and responsibilities of the RA conflict. It is difficult to be a peer, a counselor and an authority figure to hall residents while maintaining personal friendships and satisfactory academic progress. Managing multiple and often conflicting organizational roles often leads to experiencing stress. This stress may be conceptualized from organizational, interactionist and individual perspectives.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRESS

Organizational stress results from role ambiguity, role overload, role conflict, underutilization, and nonparticipation (Kahn, 1974; Kahn & Quinn, 1970; Katz & Kahn, 1966; Tannenbaum & Cooke, 1974). Role ambiguity is defined as a discrepancy between the amount of information a person has and the amount he/she requires for effective job performance. Role overload involves feeling pressure to do more work, feeling unable to do or finish one's work in an ordinary work day and feeling that the amount of work one has to do interferes with the quality of the work one is able to produce. Role conflict involves logically incompatible demands made upon an individual by two or more persons whose jobs are functionally interdependent with one's own. Underutilization occurs when worker abilities exceed those required by job demands. Nonparticipation in decisions which affect one's self may also result in stress.

INDIVIDUAL AND INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVES ON STRESS

There are many conceptualizations of stress from individual and interactionist perspectives. For example, Woolfolk and Richardson (1979) define stress as a "perception of threat or expectation of future discomfort that arouses, alerts, or otherwise activates the organism" (p.8). The environment, the appraisal and evaluation of the environment, and the reaction of emotional and physiological arousal are identified as three levels of the stress reaction. Stress has also been conceptualized as an interactive process between stressors and the individual's coping resources (Lazarus, 1966); as involving a dynamic

interaction between the individual and the environment (Barrow & Prosen, 1981); from a holistic perspective (Girdano & Everly, 1986; Pelletier, 1977); from an attentional perspective (Nideffer & Sharp, 1979), from a physiological point of view (Selye, 1976), and as a self defeating behavior (Hornak, 1983).

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Social support is also important in order to maintain one's mental health (Biegel, Naparstek & Khan, 1980). Lin and Simeone (1979) define social support as "support accessible to an individual through social ties to other individuals, groups and the larger community" (p. 109). Biegel et al. (1980) conclude from their review that social support consists of three factors: "direct support" which is derived from other individuals such as family, friends, and co-workers, etc., "indirect support" which is obtained from groups through interaction and participation processes, and "social adjustment" which is derived from the community through attachments and feelings. Social support is believed to play a major role in moderating the harmful effects of life stress such that, at times of high stress, those having high social support are likely to experience low symptoms of psychological distress (Biegel, et al., 1980).

Recognizing the stressful nature of the RA's job, a number of stress management programs for residence hall staffs have been developed and implemented (e.g. Dickson, 1981; Schuele, 1982; Hornak, 1983). Team-building is one approach which may be used to reduce stress by increasing group cohesiveness and in turn social support among RA staff members.

TEAM-BUILDING

According to French & Bell (1973), the goal of team-building interventions is "the improvement and increased effectiveness of various teams within the organization" (p. 112). Team-building may focus on family groups which are intact, permanent work teams made up of a boss and his or her subordinates; or be directed towards newly created, special purpose teams. Team-building sessions may be concerned with problem solving for task accomplishment, examining and improving interpersonal relationships, or managing the group's culture and processes.

Usually team-building involves a neutral, outside third party (consultant or counselor), a supervisor (residence hall director), and a work group (RAs). Residence hall staff team-building that is directed towards improving interpersonal relationships among the staff, increasing mutual support and reducing stress, involves the following steps which are based primarily upon French & Bell (1973).

First, a neutral, outside third party discusses the intervention with the supervisor. Increased support among group members, stress reduction, the concerns of the supervisor, etc., are discussed. Second, the supervisor meets with the work group to determine their feelings and desires regarding the team-building activity. Assuming the work group supports the intervention, the third step involves the third party meeting with each individual member of the work group and the leader. In this discussion each person is asked what problems they think the group has, how they think the group functions, and what obstacles exist that interfere with the accomplishment of group goals. Specific questions may be asked at this time concerning work stress and what is

required for mutual support.

The fourth step may be undertaken in a couple of ways. French & Bell (1973) suggest the third party may summarize and present the results of the interviews to the entire group during a team-building session which is held away from the work setting. The group then examines and discusses each issue, ranks them in terms of their importance, examines the underlying dynamics of the problems, begins to work on solving the problems, plans a course of action to deal with the problems and establishes a time table for follow up.

Another approach involves the work group (including the supervisor) completing a structured exercise designed specifically to accomplish the predetermined goals of the team-building. The traditional "coat of arms" activity was developed as a getting acquainted exercise to facilitate initial interactions among group members (Heppner, 1973). This activity may be modified to promote primarily work related discussion and disclosure among residence hall family groups. The procedures used involve the family group members drawing or symbolizing on a "coat of arms" their response (depending on the purpose of the team-building activity) to six of the following seven statements:

1. Express in a drawing your own greatest personal accomplishment.
2. Express in a drawing what your residence hall position means to you.
3. Express in a drawing your strengths as they relate to your residence hall position.
4. Express in a drawing your weaknesses as they relate to your residence hall position.
5. Express in a drawing the stress you experience as part of your

residence hall position.

6. Express in a drawing how you would like this group to work together this year.
7. Express in a drawing how other people in this group can show you support this year.

Approximately two and one-half hours should be allocated towards discussing individual responses to these statements and possibly developing plans for change. The third party leads this session. The group will typically become more open and disclosing about work related concerns as each symbol is shared in turn with other group members. After each group member discusses the first symbol, discussion proceeds to the next symbol and so on until all symbols are discussed. Group members are encouraged to talk with each other rather than direct their attention to the third party. The third party may direct discussion to the organizational and individual stress and support issues discussed earlier in this paper and can aid group members in conceptualizing some of their concerns. Typically a number of problem areas the group will want to consider further will be brought up through discussion. Objectives and plans for needed changes are then developed and a follow up time line specified. Positive elements of the existing work group processes may also be highlighted and discussed. Invariably group members become more open in their communication with and supportive of one another as they learn they are not alone in their conflicts, concerns, stresses and high points regarding their residence hall position.

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